



Department of
Veterans Affairs

Translating
Initiatives for
Depression into
Effective
Solutions



Are you feeling...

Tired,
Sad,
Angry,
Irritable,
Hopeless?



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Tired, Sad, Angry, Irritable, Hopeless?

"I feel tired and achy all the time. I can't concentrate and my body just doesn't feel right. "

Ray B.

"I don't want to get out of bed in the morning and I don't feel like eating. Nothing interests me anymore, not even spending time with my grandchildren. "

Mary P.

"I feel so angry and irritable. Little things set me off. I snap at people at work and yell at my wife and kids at home. "

Henry S.

"My husband died over a year ago but I still feel terrible. I just can't seem to move on with my life."

Susan O.

"I can't live with this despair and emptiness anymore. I feel so helpless and hopeless. I feel like dying, just to get away from the pain."

Christine B.

Do any of these feelings sound familiar to you? At least one out of every five people visiting a doctor complains of these or similar feelings. Sometimes, for no reason they know of, people act anxious, irritable, or sad.

Emotional distress and upheaval can sometimes be brought on by stressful life events such as the loss of a loved one, problems on the job or at home, medical illnesses, or a problem with a relationship.

Even positive life events, such as a job promotion, the birth of a child, or getting married, can cause distress and mood changes. These feelings may go away by themselves within a couple of weeks or months, and may not have much effect on a person's life. But, if these feelings ***don't*** go away, they may be a sign of an illness called **clinical depression**.

What is Clinical Depression?

Clinical depression is a medical condition that affects a person's mood, thoughts, behavior, and body. It changes the way a person feels, thinks, and acts. Things that used to be easy or enjoyable, such as spending time with family or friends, reading a good book, or going to the movies, take more effort. Even basic things like eating, sleeping, and sexual activity can become a problem.

Clinical depression is more than just a case of bad nerves, the blues, or the blahs. From time to time, and throughout our daily lives, we all feel a little sad, blue, or edgy. Usually, we soon begin feeling better, perhaps, after hearing some good news or visiting with a friend. But with clinical depression, unhappy or anxious feelings and thoughts don't go away. They are present almost all of the time. If not treated, depression can seriously affect your work, your personal life, and the lives of your family and friends.

Whether you have a temporary mood change or clinical depression, your doctor understands the connection between your physical, emotional and mental health. Your doctor can help you sort out your feelings and take the next step toward getting better.

What are the Symptoms?

There are many symptoms associated with depression. Depression affects different people in different ways. For example, when you're depressed you may sleep and eat more than usual, while someone else with depression may have trouble falling asleep and not feel like eating.

Key Symptoms or Problems

- Feeling sad or “empty”
- Loss of interest in things that used to be enjoyable like sex, sports, reading, or listening to music
- Trouble concentrating, thinking, remembering, or making decisions
- Trouble sleeping or sleeping too much
- Loss of energy or feeling tired
- Loss of appetite or eating too much
- Losing weight or gaining weight unexpectedly
- Frequent crying
- Feeling irritable or edgy
- Feeling worthless or guilty
- Feeling hopeless or negative
- Thinking of death or suicide
- Frequent headaches, body aches, and pains
- Digestive problems, such as bowel irregularities

Levels of Clinical Depression

Clinical depression may be mild, moderate, or severe. Some people may experience symptoms very intensely for a few weeks or months, while others may have less severe symptoms that can last many months or years. People with severe depression may have difficulty getting out of bed and caring for themselves and may have frequent thoughts about death, or even a wish to die. Effective treatment helps people get their energy and hopefulness back.

What Causes Depression?

Scientists have studied depression for many years and have concluded that many factors are involved. These factors fall into several categories: biochemical, hereditary, physical, medical, and psychosocial.

Biochemical: Researchers have discovered that when people are depressed, their brain chemistry changes. During the depression, certain “brain hormones” called neurotransmitters, are not present in the brain in the right amounts. This chemical imbalance causes both physical and emotional changes.

Hereditary: Researchers have also discovered that clinical depression tends to run in families. So, if you have a relative who has suffered from depression, you may also experience depression. Remember, not everyone who has a close relative with depression

gets clinically depressed. If you have some questions about this, talk with your doctor.

Physical: Natural changes in the body, as well as seasonal changes and lifestyle habits, can cause symptoms of depression in some people. For example, some women experience depression associated with their menstrual cycle, the recent birth of a child, or menopause. Some people are sensitive to the changing seasons, and become depressed as winter nears. Alcohol and some drugs are “depressants,” and when used too much, can cause symptoms of clinical depression.

Medical: Certain physical illnesses such as thyroid problems, stroke, some cancers, or a brain tumor can cause depression. Some prescription medications such as steroids, oral contraceptives, and certain blood pressure medications can also cause depression. If you think your symptoms of depression are caused by your medical condition or medications, **consult your doctor.**

Psychosocial: Stressful experiences and losses are among the reasons that some people become depressed. These can include the loss of a loved one, a separation or divorce, job stress or loss, financial difficulties, loneliness or isolation, moving to another place, or having a child leave home. Losses due to accident or illness (such as becoming unable to see, walk, or drive) or undergoing a change in how you look, sometimes lead people to become depressed. Feeling like you are not living up to expectations set by yourself, your family, or a social group can also cause stress that may lead to clinical depression. A history of physical, verbal, or sexual abuse or any severe trauma may make a person more likely to develop clinical depression.

Don't Blame Yourself!

Depression is *not* a personal weakness, a personality flaw, or laziness. Don't blame yourself for becoming depressed or experiencing any of the symptoms of depression. Your symptoms are part of a medical illness. While you can't control whether you become depressed, you can seek treatment for it.

How Long Does it Last?

Although some people recover naturally from clinical depression, many suffer with depression for weeks, months, or even years. Clinical depression can be **acute**, lasting for several weeks or months, or **chronic**, lasting for several years. How long depression lasts depends on the severity of symptoms, whether and when someone seeks treatment, and personal factors. Research shows that appropriate treatment can dramatically speed recovery from depression. People who are treated are also less likely to become depressed

again in the future.

Getting Help

Sometimes the idea of needing to get help for depression is hard to think about, especially if you are feeling hopeless. The idea of getting professional help for depression may seem embarrassing to you. Some people think that taking alcohol, street drugs, or tranquilizers will make them feel better. In fact, these substances make depression worse.

There can be other barriers to getting the help you need. For example, your family and friends may believe that you should be able to "get yourself together" and "snap out of it." Clinical depression is a medical illness, and like other medical illnesses, it is not fully within your control. Getting the right treatment is the key to recovery.

The first step in getting the right help for depression is talking to your doctor. Make sure to talk about any symptoms you are experiencing (especially the ones described in this booklet). Your doctor will help determine if you suffer from clinical depression, and help you choose the kind of treatment that is best for you. Taking this important first step will guide you onto the road to recovery.

What can be done?

Clinical depression can be treated several ways: with psychotherapy, antidepressant medications, or a combination of the two. Both psychotherapy and antidepressant medication help return physical and emotional functioning to normal. The type of treatment recommended depends on the type of symptoms, the severity of symptoms, and your personal preferences. Together, you and your doctor can choose the treatment best suited to your symptoms and lifestyle. The process of feeling better usually begins after only a few weeks of treatment. Although full recovery from symptoms of clinical depression may take a few months of treatment, you can take heart from the fact that full recovery is the usual outcome of treatment.

Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy is one method used to treat clinical depression. Used by itself, without medications, psychotherapy is most helpful with mild or moderate depression. In combination with medications, psychotherapy can also be used to help recover from severe depression. If you and your doctor choose psychotherapy, you will be referred to a trained psychotherapist who will work with you to find ways to understand your problems and develop techniques to work through them. In psychotherapy, you learn how to change behaviors that make your depression worse, learn how to change negative thoughts and beliefs, and learn how to develop a more positive outlook. You also learn

how to improve your relationships and incorporate more positive activities into your daily life.

Psychotherapy may begin working right away, or it may take a few weeks to show beneficial effects. There are no physical side-effects associated with psychotherapy.

Antidepressant Medications

Antidepressant medications are also used to treat clinical depression. These medications are especially necessary for treating severe depression, but can be helpful in treating mild and moderate depression as well. These medications help to balance the chemicals in your brain. They improve sleep, raise your energy level, and return your appetite to normal. It may take you a few weeks to feel better on these medications. Your symptoms, medical history, and family history provide important clues about which specific antidepressant medicine is the most appropriate for you. Your doctor will work with you on selecting the medication that is most beneficial and makes you the most comfortable. Antidepressant medications are not addictive. These medications may, however, have some physical side-effects. Your body will usually adjust to antidepressant medication within a week or two. If not, your doctor will change your medication to reduce any side effects you experience.

Why Get Help?

Treatment can help free you from the sadness, despair, and isolation caused by clinical depression. No matter how bad the feelings and thoughts, associated with depression are, there is hope. Clinical depression is a treatable medical illness. Treatment can help you to feel better, and help return you to a happier, more fulfilling life.

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